

A reminder of the road not taken: Hans-Dietrich Genscher and the holy grail of a united Europe

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4/18/2016

The state funeral of Hans-Dietrich Genscher, West Germany's longest serving foreign minister and vice-chancellor, was held on 17 April. [Kristina Spohr](#) writes on Genscher's career, his role in unifying Germany, and his ultimate aspiration to integrate both NATO and the Warsaw Pact into an all-European security order that incorporated the Soviet Union.



The unity of Europe has been one of history's holy grails. From Charlemagne to Hitler it has inspired leaders to grand dreams – and appalling nightmares. Central to that quest has been the conundrum of Germany. Is a strong state at the heart of Europe essential for unity? Or is such state-building the prelude to international domination? Does Angela Merkel now form the keystone of the European arch? Or is her country – as would-be exiters from Britain to Greece argue – the main prop of a dysfunctional system?

The career of Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who died on 31 March aged 89, throws an intriguing light on these abiding dilemmas. As West Germany's longest-serving foreign minister (1974-1992), operating in coalition with left and right (Helmut Schmidt's [Social Democrats](#) and then Helmut Kohl's [Christian Democrats](#)), he gained a reputation for slipperiness and duplicity captured in the term 'Genschermism'.

Yet he used his tactical skills for larger ends. In 1989-90, when his canny international brokering helped to finesse the complexities of German unification, Genscher became the darling of the German media. Affectionate caricatures depicted 'Genschman' as a big-eared, caped crusader – a compound of Batman and Superman. He had become a national treasure during his political lifetime.

Genscher viewed the unification of Germany as vindication of his whole political career. 'It is not very often given to a politician to turn out to be right', he remarked in 1990, especially 'while he is still alive' and 'in office'. He added proudly: 'I have the advantage of all three together'.

No other West German politician had pursued the objective of national unity with as much consistency and passion. Perhaps because Genscher was himself a product of division. Born in 1927 near Halle, in Saxony-Anhalt, in what later became East Germany, he fled that regime in 1952 and settled in the West German city of Bremen. Yet he remained in many respects a man of the East. His accent never lost its Saxon inflection and he stood out among his 'Wessi' colleagues for the empathy and imagination he brought to the problem of relations between the two German states.

But throughout his time as foreign minister, Genscher sought to embed the solution of the German question within a broader pan-European architecture. He saw the key to achieve this in the 'Helsinki process', inaugurated in 1975 by the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). This included almost all of the European states, the Soviet Union, the USA and Canada. Genscher hoped that the CSCE would facilitate a convergence of values and principles that would ultimately dissolve the Cold War barrier between east and west.

This hope proved illusory. It was not the Helsinki process that opened the door to German unification, but the combination of Soviet socio-economic malaise, imperial overstretch and the ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev – a reformer who was open to partnerships with the West. This was not quite what Genscher had anticipated but he was quick to seize the opportunity.

Whereas Kohl dismissed Gorbachev as a propagandist, comparing him in one particularly gross outburst to Joseph

Goebbels, Genscher insisted that the Soviet General Secretary should be taken at his word. At the 1987 World Economic Forum in Davos, Genscher announced that West Germany was prepared to help finance Gorbachev's modernisation programme for the USSR.

This démarche caused consternation in London and Washington. 'Genscherism', the *New York Times* reported, was now the 'dirtiest word' in the State Department; the German foreign minister was said to be so obsessed with making progress on the German question that he was ready to sell the Atlantic alliance down the river.

The abuse was predictable, but unfair. In the bitter controversy over the stationing in West Germany of US Pershing II and Cruise nuclear missiles, Genscher had been a staunch supporter of the NATO position. In contrast with many German left-wingers, he always remained loyal to the Alliance which, he argued, must stay in place until a state of deep peace was achieved in which NATO and the Warsaw Pact could *both* be dissolved into an all-European security order that incorporated the Soviet Union. Hence his enthusiasm for Gorbachev's idea of a 'common European home', in which Europeans would live under the same roof while looking out of different windows.

This vision, too, proved utopian. Faced with the choice between the long and uncertain road to a 'common European home' and the swift accomplishment of German unity, Genscher chose the latter. He worked with Kohl in 1990 to extract Soviet approval for a unified Germany with full sovereign rights and NATO membership, using all his tactical skills – backed by large injections of DMs. The 'Helsinki process' was abandoned. Likewise the aspiration to enfold the new Russia within the new Europe. That was, perhaps, one of the reasons for his surprise resignation in 1992.

Genscher was right to embed his ambitions for Germany within a broader European vision, but *gouverner, c'est choisir*. Ultimately he was obliged to choose one of these goals over the other. As we look back now from 2016 on an EU that perhaps enlarged too rapidly (and a NATO that expanded too fast and too far to the East), with insufficient attention to the consequences for Europe and the effect on Russia, Genscherism – always vague yet tantalising – is a reminder of the road not taken.

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